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SUBJECT: EDUCATION IN A HIMALAYAN KINGDOM: ANOTHER FACET OF  
BHUTAN'S MODERNIZATION

REF: NEW DELHI 6903

Classified By: CDA Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (U) Summary: During Poloff's August 22-25 visit to Bhutan, our interlocutors insisted that Bhutan is committed to educating its children by providing free schooling for all. Primary school enrollment stands at 87.8 percent. The government's decision in the 1950s to use English as the medium for instruction has created a large English speaking work force. Bhutan's mountainous terrain and the remoteness of many villages poses difficulties in providing education for all, but the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has created community schools and boarding facilities to help alleviate the problem. As more students graduate with rising expectations, the country is finding it difficult to find them suitable employment. The government's development plan addressed the problem by expanding vocational training, to better prepare graduates to enter the economy. Ethnic-Nepali students with family members in the refugee camps face discrimination and are often not permitted access to higher education. End Summary.

Education For All: Almost There  
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2. (U) Bhutanese policy is to provide free primary education for all Bhutanese children, and the government has made an admirable effort to meet this goal. Tshewang Tandin, Bhutan's Director of School Education told Poloff that the RGOB decided four decades ago that the key to economic and social development in Bhutan was the creation of a modern education system that would bring the country out of isolation and prepare its population for interaction with the outside world. In 1961, Bhutan had 11 non-monastic schools educating approximately 400 students. As of February 2005, Bhutan's 476 schools were teaching 162,545, out of an approximate population of 700,000. Enrollment increased 4.4 percent from 2004, with 87.8 percent of 6 to 12 year-olds enrolled in primary schools. Tandin noted that current programs to increase attendance are working well that the RGOB has suspended plans to adopt mandatory enrollment. He acknowledged that budgetary constraints and overcrowding in some schools would need to be overcome before Bhutan could meet its 100 percent enrollment goal.

3. (C) All children studying in government schools receive free tuition, books, and when necessary, a stipend for boarding. However, in 1993 the government began requiring students to contribute a nominal sum to a school welfare fund scheme. (Approximately 70 cents for primary, \$2.30 for lower secondary, and \$4.60 for middle and higher secondary students per year). The Government also provides students attending private schools with free text books and all students in rural areas receive free stationary. However, a UNICEF study showed that although education is technically free, the average parent spent approximately \$40 over a six-month period to send their child to school. UNICEF Resident Representative Anoja Wijeyesekera told Poloff that, due to extreme poverty in rural areas, even these small costs can keep children out of school. Advancement through the system is based on performance in a series of national exams, the first after class six and the second after class ten. Students not accepted on their first attempt can repeat the exam or apply to vocational training institutes. Tandin confirmed that 40 percent of class ten graduates go on to higher secondary schools.

Language of Instruction: English Was A Good Choice  
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4. (U) The RGOB initially faced a difficult decision over which language to use for instruction, before settling on English. Bhutan has 19 indigenous languages and dialects, with none spoken by the entire population. Tandin noted that the decision to use English reflected both economics and the desire to create national unity, as it would have been too expensive to publish texts in each native language. Also, the RGOB wanted a neutral common language that the many regional groups could use to communicate with each other. He pointed out that first and second grade students spend a majority of class time learning English, so they can later study other subjects in that language.

5. (U) The school system is modeled on the Indian system and

the government initially discussed teaching lessons in Hindi. However, Tandin acknowledged that in retrospect, the government is pleased with its decision to use English. "We are in a much better position and have improved access to the world economy, because we have a large English speaking work force," Tandin stated. Director of Tourism Lhatu Wangchuk noted that approximately 70 percent of the tourists who visit Bhutan are from the United States and Bhutan's large English-speaking labor pool makes it much easier to service these clients.

#### Rural Education: A Bhutanese Solution

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16. (C) Tandin asserted that providing education for rural students is a major problem. The rugged terrain and towering Himalayan peaks isolate numerous hamlets, with many tiny homesteads a seven to ten day trek from the nearest road. Tandin acknowledged that children living in these remote areas make up a significant part of the 12 percent of students currently not enrolled in primary school. Wijeyesekera also pointed out that some poor parents also require their children to work on the family farm instead of attending school.

17. (U) With 59 percent of its schools located in rural or remote areas, the government has created a system of community primary schools to increase access to education. Community primary schools provide education to villages too small to support a regular school. Usually much smaller than other primary schools, they employ educated villagers to teach classes.

18. (U) Tandin commented that another reason why Bhutan has not made schooling compulsory, is because it would cause undue hardship for children from outlying areas. The government's goal is to provide primary schooling within a 90 minute walking distance to all children, but Bhutan's mountainous terrain has made this difficult. In response, the government created boarding facilities at most schools so children from remote areas would not be left out. The Ministry of Education reported that 50 percent of primary, lower secondary, and middle secondary schools have such facilities and almost all higher secondary schools can board students. In 2005, 15 percent of students in primary, 13 percent in lower secondary, 21 percent in middle secondary and 60 percent in higher secondary schools took advantage of this option.

#### Gender Equality: Better, But Not Perfect

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19. (C) Bhutan has made great strides in providing equal access to education, and female enrollment almost equals that of males in primary and middle secondary schools. In 2004, 48 percent of students in primary and 49 percent of students in lower and middle secondary schools were girls. In the districts of Bumthang, Haa, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu, Trongsa, and Wangdu, girl students actually outnumbered boys. However, there is still a disparity in higher education, with only 40 percent of students in grades ten and eleven being female. UNICEF reported that the disparity is likely due to the fact that many secondary schools are far away from family homes, requiring boarding, and parents are less comfortable sending girls to these schools. The report also noted that boys still get preference over girls due to the widespread belief that husbands will look after their wives. Only 33 percent of university/vocational students are female.

#### Higher Education: Let's Go West

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10. (U) Bhutan had 18 post-secondary institutions spread across the country with a total enrollment of 4,429 in 2004. Tandin confirmed that although Bhutan's goal is to create a world class university system, Bhutan continues to send many students to India, the US, Canada, and the UK for university education and this will not likely change. "We have more students graduating from secondary school that should go to university than we can accommodate," stated Tandin, "and we feel it is good to have students educated in the West, who will return to Bhutan with their knowledge."

11. (U) A number of interlocutors confirmed that Bhutan is having trouble finding jobs for the increasing number of university graduates. Department of Employment Director Karma Tshering asserted that most college graduates would prefer a government job, but that there are not enough to go around. He indicated that less than 100 of this year's approximately 600 graduates would receive jobs with the RGOB. He noted that Bhutan needed to make private sector jobs more attractive and his office was looking into ways to do this.

#### Vocational Training: A Professional Blue Collar Force

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¶12. (U) Tshering also acknowledged that Bhutan was facing a "skills gap" in the blue-collar sector, due mainly to a construction boom, and needed to address the issue. In 1999, Bhutan opened a series of vocational schools to provide training in the "trades" and to "professionalize" the blue-collar work force. Bhutan now has four vocational schools with 700 students. Our interlocutors told us that students generally are not interested in blue-collar jobs and prefer desk jobs, due to higher salaries and less strenuous work. In 2003 the RGOB introduced an apprenticeship program to increase salaries and make the trades more attractive to young people entering the work force. The program offers graduated levels of certification and the government expects workers in the advanced levels to demand higher salaries. Tshering said that an entrepreneur program will start next

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year to teach blue-collar workers how to start small businesses and earn more money.

Southern Bhutan: The Schools Are Open

¶13. (C) Acknowledging that the disturbances in southern Bhutan in the early 1990s destroyed many schools or forced them to close, Tandin stated that they are now open and that new schools were built to replace those that were lost. UNICEF's Wijeyesekera and Australian Coordination Bureau Program Manager Ramesh Chhetri, who is ethnically Nepali and a Hindu, confirmed Tandin's claim.

Bhutan's Dark Cloud: The Refugee Problem

¶14. (C) The education system is not immune to the Bhutanese refugee problem. Our interlocutors told us that the Government continues to deny "No Objection Certificates" (NOCs) to ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese with family members in the refugee camps in Nepal. The NOCs are needed for government jobs, overseas scholarships, and admission to schools past the tenth grade level. Chhetri, Wijeyesekera and UNDP Resident Representative Renata Dessallien told us that without clearances, ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese with relatives living in the camps often could not obtain higher education and scholarships. In a candid moment, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Under Secretary Chitem Tenzin (Protect) conceded that this situation was discriminatory, problematic and would have to change. He maintained that it could not last for much longer, especially in light of the upcoming constitution and moves toward democracy.

Comment: A Valiant Effort

¶15. (C) Bhutan has made a valiant effort to educate its population, especially in light of its financial and geographic constraints. The government's success is evident each day at 2:30 PM when schools let out and the streets and pathways of Thimphu fill with children in school uniforms walking home. Reaching a primary school enrollment rate of 87.8 percent of the population would be noteworthy for any country as poor as Bhutan, and doing so in the Himalayan mountains, where a 20 kilometer walk can take days, is remarkable. The Government's commitment to providing education to its urban and rural children is clearly evident.

¶16. (C) Bhutan's Achilles Heal -- the refugee problem -- showed itself again when analyzing the education system. Denying higher education to students, solely on their relation to refugees, is discriminatory and inexcusable. However, the RGOB recently acknowledged that Bhutan's ethnic-Nepali population are Bhutanese citizens by issuing them identify cards (Reftel). Tenzin's comments that the denial of education to those with relatives in the camps was discriminatory was also echoed by other interlocutors. With the advent of democracy and political inclusion of this group, this practice should diminish.

¶17. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:  
(<http://www.state.sgov/p/sa/newdelhi>)  
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